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## Misrepresentation, Identity, and Authorship in Percival Everett's *Erasure*

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### Abstract

The microcosm of Percival Everett's *Erasure*—just as our own world—is interwoven with a set of normative expectations that not only circumscribe the self-identity of its main character, Thelonious Monk Ellison, but have a determining effect on him as an author as well. This paper explores a delicate link connecting racial misrepresentations, cultural industries, and power inequalities. It argues that the novel seeks to undermine the historically dominant assumptions of racial authenticity as well as locate to true racial authenticity in the plurality of African American experience. In doing so, it utilises Foucauldian notions of subjectivity, power, and discursive formations. Such concepts allow for the understanding of human subjectivity as the effect of larger semiotic systems. In this context, race is understood as a prescriptive rather than descriptive concept—a category that figures as a tool of social control. Consequently, Percival Everett's *Erasure* enters into a dialogue with the dominant racial representations of the contemporary United States in the hope of deracialising the American imaginary.

**Keywords:** *Percival Everett, Erasure, race, power, ideology, subjectivity, double consciousness*

Misrepresentations of blackness can be traced back to colonial times. Even though the cultural forms of racial stereotyping have undergone major permutations since then, they share a common imperial heritage—the desire to sustain the socio-political, economic, and moral superiority of whiteness. In this regard, the practice of minstrelsy, *coon* comedies or, more recently, ghetto novels are contingent on a discursive economy which seeks to sustain societies along racialised lines. Popular cultural imagery has its roots in the everyday assumptions of ordinary people. Since everyday experience is never devoid of hegemonic assumptions, culture becomes the sphere of stereotyping where dominant discourses take control over narrative repre-

sentations of minorities (Hall 473). Consequently, only those representations which conform to the hegemonic criteria of authenticity are considered worthwhile by the majority (475). Since a large proportion of the community has a vested interest in sustaining asymmetric power relations among different races, popular portrayals usually seek to naturalise unequal distribution of power. In this regard, the criteria of black authenticity lie in the eyes of the beholder (Lubiano 189). Considering that racial authenticity has generally been constructed from a majority perspective in the United States, African Americans have usually defined themselves “through the eyes of others” (W. E. B. Du Bois xiii). Percival Everett’s 2001 novel, *Erasure* expresses a powerful critique of racial stereotyping and commodification of racial misrepresentations. This article seeks to explore how, within the microcosm of the novel, racial misrepresentations perpetuate a hegemonic discourse, which, by the act of racialisation, constructs and controls African American subjectivities.

In the microcosm of *Erasure*, race plays a prominent role. As Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, the narrator of the novel puts it, he “hardly ever think[s] about race,” yet some people will try to ruin him “because they do believe in race [...]” (Everett 4). This is so because race is not merely a neutral category of identification. Instead, membership to a certain race assigns its members a certain social status. Ellison’s dark skin not only implies that “some of [his] ancestors were slaves” but also provides justification for white policemen to detain him without any apparent reason, and thus to remind him of the subject position prescribed for *blackness* (3). In this respect, race figures as a prominent tool of social control. That is, as an integral part of the hegemonic narrative, the epistemology of racial categories lends the appearance of legitimacy to the hegemonic social order. Consequently, Percival Everett insinuates that even at the brink of the 21<sup>st</sup> century *blackness* is linked to an inferior position in the social hierarchy.

Thelonious Monk Ellison, the protagonist of Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, struggles to fit into the racialised microcosm the novel presents to its readers. Ellison, who does not “believe in race” (4), refuses to conform to the hegemonic racial assumptions of society. For even though he is of a muscular build, he is bad at basketball, instead of rap, he listens to *white* music, reads continental philosophy, speaks in a middle-class accent, and generally does *white* things (Everett 3). Consequently, as he says: “[s]ome people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing” (4). Whilst Ellison consciously resists the expectations held towards him,

his struggle is at the heart of his isolated and alienated existence that determines his being at a fundamental level. In other words, the racialising pressure mounted on Ellison from without, by forcing him into subordination, circumscribes Ellison's self-identity (Butler 3). Although, by refusing to occupy the subject position reserved for *blackness*, Ellison slips out of the grips of power, he is denied entry into the very structure of society and is doomed to a liminal existence.

The vivid imagery of woodworking that dominates the initial part of the book functions as a metaphor highlighting the nature of social existence within the novel.

Saws cut wood. They either rip with the grain or cut across it. A rip saw will slice smoothly along the grain, but chew up the wood if it goes against the grain. It is all in the geometry of the teeth, the shape, size and set of them, how they lean away from the blade. Crosscut teeth are typically smaller than rip teeth. The large teeth of rip saws shave material away quickly and there are deep gaps between them which allow shavings to fall away, keeping the saw from binding. Crosscut teeth make a wider path, are raked back and beveled to points. The points allow the crosscut saw to score and cleave the grain cleanly. (Everett 4–5)

In the quoted passage, the typology of different saws seems to stand for the formative effect of racial stereotypes, representations, and expectations. For, just like saws, they serve, as it were, to cut and carve out one's subjectivity. The geometry, "shape, size and the set of" the saw teeth determine the character of the marks left on our beings (5). Yet, as Percival Everett suggests, there is no escape: the saw teeth will carve deeply into our flesh—for this is what they are designed to do. It may come as no surprise then that whilst Ellison is making the final touches on a wooden table, he recalls Foucault's "discussion of discursive formations" (152). According to Foucault, "discursive formations" are systems of meaning that circumscribe the horizons of what can be thought and said (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 116). These formations not only make the world knowable for us, but they also impose their order on it—they establish "[t]he rules of formation" that constitute human "conditions of existence" (38). Hence, such semiotic systems, by demarcating the subject positions in the world, construct and regulate the self. Consequently, discursive formations figure as the "[...] modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (Foucault "The Subject and Power" 777). It is the deeply racialised culture of the United States that forces Ellison to fit into a subject

position that is completely alien to him. Hence, by invoking Foucault's idea of discursive formations and their power over self-identities, Percival Everett weaves into the fabric of *Erasure* a conceptual thread which illuminates the link between racialisation and subject formation.

Racial expectations, however, are even more crippling to Ellison's literary career. Rejections, negative reviews, and criticisms of his novels are usually supported with the line that his prose too is "not black enough" (Everett 49). Ellison refuses to feed the public demand for "the true, gritty real stories of black life" (4), which would reinforce the stereotypical image of African American experience associated with criminality, pathology, and irrationality. As a result, his prose is considered inauthentic as it fails to approximate the racial assumptions of the American public. According to Michel Foucault, a literary work accommodates a variety of signs alluding to the persona of the author ("What is an Author?" 228). Whilst Foucault originally talks about textual clues pointing in the direction of the author, the paper views, paratextual hints to be just as much important. For it is due to the photo on the back cover of his first novel that the public is very well aware of the fact that Ellison is black. In this way, his authorial identity gets entrapped within the racial rubric of literary discourse, his fiction is perceived as "a certain mode of being of discourse," as an utterance that must be approached with certain assumptions and assigned a certain status (228). As a result, his literary works are interpreted with reference to his ethnic origin and are expected to conform to the prevailing racial expectations. Yet, the characters inhabiting Ellison's fiction are not "called niggers," do not "comb their afros," do not speak the vernacular of Harlem and do not dwell in ghettos (Everett 49). Hence, when Ellison looks up his novels in a bookstore, he finds his novels in the African American studies section, where those interested in his fiction would not even consider looking for it (34). Thus, as Ellison fails to approximate the prevailing racial expectations, the publishing industry and the market do not recognise him as a fiction writer of African American descent.

Although Ellison's novels are unpopular due to their perceived inauthenticity, *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* by Juanita Mae Jenkins is considered "a masterpiece of African American literature" (46). The novel, telling the story of Sharonda F'rinda Johnson, is acclaimed for providing a credible insight into "the typical Black life in an unnamed ghetto in America" (46). At fifteen she is shown to be already pregnant with her third child (from her mother's third husband), lives with her junkie mother and her mentally challenged basketball-playing brother (46). The novel provides readers with a panoply of assumed

racial characteristics. As a fictional reviewer writes, “[o]ne can actually hear the voices of [Jenkin’s] people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America” (46). There are only certain forms of authentic *Black America* for the American public and the experience of those who do not conform to these criteria is simply ignored. Margaret Russet notes that African American novelists are held to an overly reductive “standard of empirical-reference,” as based on their skin colour; the works of African American writers are primarily read against the prevailing racial expectations (360). Though Russet is right in pointing that racial markings are physical signifiers, it is believed that they serve to link the empirical with the imaginary, and thereby, the referent to which black authors are held is of an ideological nature. For Jenkin’s characters, the voice through which she speaks, and the microcosm she portrays do not have any actual correspondence in empirical reality. Instead, her fiction is applauded for its authenticity as it confirms the ideological assumptions generally held by the American public. It constructs blackness in opposition to the socially dominant rationality and succeeds in portraying racialised groups as the enemies of reason, order, and morality.

A change in Ellison’s circumstances, however, nudges him to reconsider his principles. Upon the tragic death of his sister, he moves back to the parental home to take care of his ageing mother. Living on his minimal royalties without a job in New York, Ellison is faced with a financial situation that proves stifling for him. Seeing no better way out, he puts a page in his father’s manual typewriter and begins to write a novel on which he knows he can “never put [his] name” (Everett 70). *My Pafology*, written in a strong dialect, tells the story of the ghetto-dwelling Van Go Jenkins and recounts his path towards criminal life. Van Go, who fathered four children from four different women, moves between odd jobs, commits minor offences, and has no interest in becoming a good citizen. With the help of his mother, Van Go gets employment with a rich black family. Although he tries not to blow his chance initially, he ends up raping the heavily drunk daughter of his employer one night. That is, Van Go loses control over his baser urges and goes against the dictum of reason. Completely in line with the dominant racial assumptions, *My Pafology* demarcates black subjectivity in opposition to reason—in opposition to *white* rationality. Drawing on Falguni Sheth, Ellison associates African Americans with a perceived “unruliness” that provides both the basis and the justification of their racialisation in *My Pafology* (26).

Historically, circulating tropes of black authenticity have engaged in the discursive construction and maintenance of racial divisions. The representations of blackness disseminated through literature, music or films have not only provided a basis for racial self-definition, but they have also framed the expected behaviour and habitus of “an ideal Black man or [a] woman” (Nguyen and Anthony 772). Racial misrepresentations, being integral part of discursive formations, engage in the construction of collective identities and their ascription on racialised subjects. Hence, they “provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories” (Appiah 97). In this sense, racial misrepresentations lend the sense of “narrative unity” to African American lives, and thus profoundly shape African American experience (97).

Having said that, *My Pafology* makes a subtle, self-conscious allusion to the link between commercial value and racial stereotypes. Following Van Go’s sexual attack on his employer’s daughter, he is invited to Snookie Cane’s talk show, where, to his astonishment, instead of applause he is faced with a series of questions about neglecting his children and not paying any child support. Nevertheless, at the peak of the show, as two policemen come for Van Go, Snookie Cane explains that Van go might have raped a woman (Everett 137). In this sense, Van Go’s appearance on the show is the confirmation of the assumed racial characteristics through which Van Go becomes “a proper TV nigger” (130). Van Go, however, manages to run away from the studio. As a fugitive, he commits a double homicide, killing a shop owner and a man who claims to be his father. Following a hostage situation, the police manages to catch him by sabotaging his getaway car. He is pulled out of the car by his hair and is forced to the ground, while the cameras point at him (149). Yet, he is not bothered anymore. As he says: “I be on the TV. The Cameras be full of me. I on TV [sic]” (150). With his arrest, Van Go Jenkins reinforces the ideological image of the African-American. Percival Everett implies that the overexposure of such stereotypical representations in media is premised on the fact that they conform to the hegemonic criteria of African American authenticity.

By publishing *My Pafology*, Ellison relinquishes his identity and succumbs to the power of the racial stereotyping imposed upon him. As Darryl Dickinson-Carr points out with regards to *Erasure*, the American public expects no ingenuity from black authors, only grittiness and “pathology” and this is exactly what Ellison gives them (46). Right at the beginning of writing the novel, Ellison starts to feel pain in his feet coursing up to his spine right into his brain. Passages from

*Native Son*, *The Color Purple*, and *Amos and Andy* occur to him, and he starts “screaming inside,” protesting that he does not “sound like that,” that his parents or his family do not “sound like that” (Everett 70). Following the success of the book, Ellison starts to feel as “a sell-out” (182). Although he publishes the book under the pseudonym of Stagg R. Leigh, as *My Pafology* gains currency, a complex authorial identity develops out of the name and the blurry photograph on the back cover of the book which reinforces the racial assumption of the market. His work kills off Ellison by negating him as an author only to bring into life the authorial persona of Stagg R. Leigh. As the persona constructed by the public overwrites Ellison’s identity, Everett employs Barthes’ famous thesis that “the death of the Author” is redeemed by “the birth of the reader” to make sense of the realities of African American experience (383). Accordingly, Everett suggests that, by producing works that conform to stereotypes, writers of African American origin renounce agency over their work and become puppets to hegemonic racial expectations.

Although *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* are explicitly alluded to, they are not the only canonical works of African American literature with which *Erasure* enters into a dialogue. Whilst Everett appears to suggest that these texts are an integral part of the discursive economy which legitimates the inferior status of African Americans, the character of Thelonious Ellison, who is considered inauthentic both as a person and an author, seems to point back to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The “invisibility” of Ralph Ellison’s narrator is not the result of “a biochemical accident to [his] epidermis” but “a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom [he] come[s] in contact” (3). That is to say, his invisibility has more to do with the way society and, mainly, the white majority perceives him. As Scott Thomas Gibson points out, it is an issue of perception on the part of those whose ideological assumptions prevent them from beholding the African American subject in its totality (362). Thelonious Ellison in *Erasure* too suffers from a kind of invisibility. Provided that his literary works are perceived as “not black enough” for the public, as an author he is destined to obscurity (Everett 49). Whilst Ellison’s invisibility appears as the direct consequence of his assumed inauthenticity, the cultural fabrication and consumption of authentic *blackness* get to be seen as the contemporary means of policing and segregating racial boundaries (Gibson 261). Therefore, the claim that *My Pafology* represents “the true story of what it is like to be black in America” reinforces the assumption that it is in one way or another inferior to the experience of *whiteness* (Everett 262–263).

It must be noted, however, that Ellison initially actively engages in the construction of Stagg R. Leigh but as he contemplates his own role in Stagg R. Leigh's birth, he can see the irony startlingly well. He is "a victim of racism by virtue of [his] failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have [his] art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression." He decides "to wear the mask of the person" he is "expected to be" to unshackle himself from being economically oppressed (238). As Ellison is asserting Stagg Leigh's individuality and "annihilating [his] own presence," he can see that the public loves Stagg R. Leigh (276). Even after owning up to be the author of the novel, Ellison goes further to prove that he is "the real thing" (244–245). He goes as far as to suggest that Stagg R. Leigh might have "'killed a man with the leather awl of a Swiss army knife'" (245). Upon this utterance, Cynthia, the naïve companion of the well-known producer, Willy Morgenstein, eyed "Stagg quite differently." It is now undeniable to her that Stagg is "the real thing" (245). Her gaze here seems to figure as a metaphor for the publishing industry that creates and superimposes Stagg R. Leigh's persona on Ellison's self and body. As a result, the market takes Ellison, "...reconfigure[s]" him "[t]hen disintegrate[s]" him, "leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere" (285). Ellison, who gains financial profit from selling the persona of Stagg R. Leigh, eventually, has "to pay the price" by "losing" himself locked up in a body with Stagg R. Leigh (286).

The duality of Thelonious Ellison and Stagg R. Leigh points back to W. E. B. Du Bois' idea of "double-consciousness." For Du Bois, this is "a peculiar sensation," a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (xiii). Ellison can indeed feel his "two-ness" (Appiah 97). He is a middle-class American and a black; two selves, two apparently contradictory identities locked into a racially marked body. Stagg R. Leigh and Ellison inhabit the same body, and they make the trip to Stagg R. Leigh's first public appearance on the *Kenya Dunston Show* "...together, on the same flight and, sadly, in the same seat" (Everett 265). Stagg R. Leigh does not merely remain an alter-ego but becomes the pure embodiment of the racial expectations imposed on him. At the end of the novel, when Stagg is awarded one of the most prestigious literary awards in the country, Thelonious Ellison experiences a moment of epiphany. In a vision, his childhood self holds up a mirror in which he can see the reflection of Stagg R. Leigh (293). This moment clears away his illusions, and Ellison comes to understand that he has al-



lowed himself to grow identical with the image society has sought to construct of him.

In addition to the main body of the novel and Stagg R. Leigh's book, the readers find fictional dialogues between historical characters, sketches, story fragments, and a complete conference paper in the novel. These fragments are an organic part of *Erasure* and by providing an insight into the workings of several discursive formations, serve to illuminate the interconnectedness of race, identity, and authenticity. As Françoise Sammarcelli points out, the "journal format" employed in *Erasure* provides various different outlooks on the narrative as well as facilitates the illustration of the story with seemingly far-fetched associations (2). Everett seems particularly fond of allusions to the Nazi approach to art, and from these references, the fictional dialogue between Hitler and Eckhart, one of his early friends and political allies, is most relevant for this discussion. Although Everett adds an additional *h* to Eckart's name, either intentionally or by a mistake, misspelling it as "Eckhart," it is obvious that Hitler talks to Dietrich Eckart in these conversations. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eckart became immensely popular with his adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which he tailored to suit his political interests. As Ralph M. Engelman highlights, by his adaptation of *Peer Gynt*, Eckart sought to fabricate a "racial allegory" in which Great Boyg and the trolls stood for "the Jewish spirit"—the force seeking to subjugate the German nation (120). In the dialogue written by Everett, it endlessly irritates Eckart that his whole recognition rests on his well-known adaptation. As he explains that he has come to hate *Peer Gynt*, Hitler, oblivious to Eckart's meaning, explains that as Eckart "unveiled the Jews for what they are," *Peer Gynt* now "speaks to the German soul." In response to Hitler's readiness to fight the trolls with him, Eckart can only concede and utter that "[t]hey will destroy German culture if we let them" (Everett 45). The irony of this dialogue is that, similar to Thelonious Ellison, Eckart has only limited control over the reception of his work. If he is to preserve his authorial status, he must go along with the social expectations. Hence, he can either be recognised as an artist for the adaptation that resonates with the dominant tropes of Teutonic mythology or be completely ignored.

In a similar way, an imagined dialogue between two painters, de Kooning and Rauschenberg, highlights the leitmotif of the novel. Having asked de Kooning for a painting, Rauschenberg erases the work and presents it as his own.

de Kooning: You put your name on it.

Rauschenberg: Why not? It's my work.

de Kooning: Your work? Look at what you've done to my picture.

Rauschenberg: Nice job, eh? It was a lot of work erasing it. My wrist is still sore. I call it "Erased Drawing."

de Kooning: That's very clever.

Rauschenberg: I've already sold it for ten grand.

de Kooning: You sold my picture?

Rauschenberg: No, I erased your picture. I sold my erasing.  
(254)

Everett insinuates that both *My Pafology* and *Erasure* are akin to Rauschenberg's erasing. Ellison constructs the African American subject in terms of the dominant racial expectations and sells this 'erasure' to the American public through *My Pafology*. Highlighting the constructedness of the dominant racial representations, Percival Everett's *Erasure* seeks to obliterate their legitimacy as authentic portrayals of the African American experience.

*My Pafology* is not merely a novel within the novel but becomes the negative reflection of *Erasure*. Thus, the two plotlines show interesting analogies. Both Ellison and Van Go Jenkins struggle under the burden of racialised stereotypes and struggle to fit into the subject position that society demarcates for them based on their ethnic origin. Yet, their financial circumstances force them to act according to the dictum of the dominant social expectations. Van Go Jenkins fully fits into his expected role by becoming a living example of assumed black pathology, Thelonious Ellison does just the same by becoming Stagg R. Leigh. That is, through conforming to the dominant racial assumptions both of them turn into a simulacrum without a referent in reality, which ironically gets to be regarded as *the real thing*. Thus, as Françoise Sammarcelli argues, *Erasure* converts Ralph Ellison's "motif of invisibility" into a motif "of media overexposure," which is underlined by the fact that both "*My Pafology* and *Erasure* end with their protagonist facing the camera" (2). Consequently, Ellison, who so far has been invisible to the racialised vision of the public, is transformed into the very stereotype of the African American author. In this sense, his final reaction to the public at the award ceremony, where he stares into the camera and utters, "Egads, I'm on

Television”” invokes Van Go Jenkins’ reaction to the media coverage of his arrest (Everett 294). Hence, their final moments seem to indicate their entrapment in the imaginary realm. Thus, as both Ellison and Van Go Jenkins merge together with the dominant racial stereotypes, “the signs of the real” become substituted “for the real” itself (Baudrillard 2). Consequently, they turn out to be empty racial signifiers with no referent in actual reality.

To sum up, Percival Everett’s *Erasure* illuminates a delicate link connecting racial misrepresentations, cultural industries, and power inequalities. Everett not only seeks to erase the previously dominant representations of blackness but suggests that authenticity is to be found in the plurality of black perspective instead of exclusionary stereotypes. Through *Erasure*, the struggle of Thelonious Ellison for recognition and his subsequent failure become the tragedy of African Americans who, like him, do not conform to the dominant stereotype of authentic blackness.



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